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5 YEARS TO ACHIEVE THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS ... Any Advance on That?

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Last week, five years before the target date, hundreds of heads of state, foreign ministers and directors of multilateral and bilateral aid agencies met at the New York headquarters of the United Nations Organization to deliberate on and revise the state of attainment of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG). Still caught in the undertow of the crisis that has shaken the very foundations of modern economics, both the leaders of the richest and most powerful countries of the planet and the chief international institutions once again focused the discussion on quantity, which was a long way from the necessary debate about how to improve the quality of this aid.

For those not in the know, despite all the money poured out on advertising campaigns, the MDG consist of eight main interrelated aims: eradicating extreme poverty and hunger; achieving universal primary education; promoting gender equality and empowering women; reducing the child mortality rate; improving maternal health; combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; ensuring environmental sustainability; and developing a global partnership for development. This simple account, produced at a similar summit in 2000, represented a great leap forward in defining and profiling the aims of an “industry” – international cooperation – that was booming with the thrust of a great sense of international solidarity and, in particular, as the result of the sums of money, measured in multi-million-dollar quantities, derived from a process of economic and financial globalisation that was proceeding at full speed, especially for the developed countries. Ancillary to this, and implausible as it may seem after so much time, the initiative came hand in hand with the development of mechanisms for periodical evaluation of the accomplishment of the goals and, more important, it facilitated uniting the disperse efforts of the ever-increasing number of the actors involved. After more than five decades of official development assistance, the enemy to be combated began to take shape and international cooperation knew where it was meant to be heading.

Nonetheless, after the ten years’ existence of this global endeavour and with more than a billion dollars spent by the leading donor countries and multilateral agencies over this period, the most recent assessments are hardly conducive to optimism. In effect, substantial advances have been made on the global scale in such

crucial matters as poverty, availability of educational and child health facilities, prenatal care and access to water, but closer scrutiny reveals that this progress is very badly distributed and highly concentrated in geographic terms. Hence, for example, it is paradoxical that China, a country that until very recently was outside the traditional structures of international cooperation, should have been more successful in reducing poverty on the world scale than all the rest of the development agencies and organisations in other developing countries.

Before this absence of progress, the response has been par for the course and also the simplest: ask for more money. Zapatero and Sarkozy, for example, have been talking about new types of financing. The main news programmes and newspapers and even the great stars of film and sport, have reminded us of the need to collaborate economically in order to struggle against the affliction which, in its different forms, threatens hundreds of millions of people throughout the world every day. These are very praiseworthy attitudes, but simplifying such a complex problem as underdevelopment and, in particular, the way in which the rich countries can help in the struggle, could be harmful in the long run. Very few of these sources would be the ones who might explain the terrible impact of the European Union's common agricultural policy (which, incidentally, eats up half of the community budget) on African herdsmen, the pernicious pull effect that restrictive migration policy is having on the inhabitants of poor countries, or the undercapitalisation of public funds because of the existence of tax havens. Indeed, at times, cooperation assistance is perceived as being doled out by the developed world to poor countries in compensation for the obstacles and difficulties it has placed in the way of their development.

To all this must be added the fact that the rich countries have fallen into significant disrepute in the eyes of the poor countries because they have not kept their word or honoured commitments. With the global economic crisis, besides the serial non-fulfilment of commitments undertaken at earlier summits, the developing countries have witnessed how the G20 countries have spent more money on fiscal stimulus plans in 2009 alone than all the aid provided to the countries of Sub-Saharan Africa ever since information on the matter was first compiled (more than fifty years ago!).

Attaining the MDGs requires a lot more than money and good intentions. Apart from the need for better economic governance at the global level – in which poor countries would cease to be mere spectators of the decisions taken in the domains of trade and finance by the G8 or G20 countries – international cooperation is in need of thoroughgoing institutional reforms that might establish an adequate framework of incentives. Among the most urgent matters, these reforms should be undertaken with a view to increasing the transparency of aid flows, favouring coherence – within each individual actor and the set of actors as a whole – and improving evaluation and follow-up mechanisms. Acting in these three domains would bring about progress in establishing the rules of the game in which all actors in the field of cooperation (countries, NGOs, multilateral organisms, companies, et cetera) would understand that failing to fulfil commitments, or going ahead with initiatives or policies that are detrimental to poor countries will somehow (socially, for example) be penalised. On this point, the MDGs are at their lamest since who, singular or plural, will be held accountable, and how, if these commitments have not been met by 2015?

While the rules and regulations of cooperation persist as they are, the MDG summits will continue to look more like an auction in which the most oft-heard words are, "Any advance on that?"